

To Fight Another Day

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The tramp freighter *Quandary's* ruddycheeked second mate pulled off his headset. "Silver Station's under full alert," he exclaimed. "Somebody intends to blow it up in less than a day"

Tinian l'att pushed a strand of red-blond hair behind her left ear. The news sparked no rush of fear, no clench at the pit of her stomach, and that disappointed her. Other people might die, people who had reasons to go on living. It seemed wrong not to care. "Who wants to blow it up?" she asked. "Why?"

Ten days ago, the *Quandary* had picked up Tinian and her traveling companions at Ksiczzic III. Tinian had never seen poverty before she started running from the Empire. She was getting a fast education. Half of the *Quandary's* bulkheads braced the other half, and its crew took pitiful pride in mismatched uniforms that she would've been ashamed to wear on the job back at l'att Armament. The second mate had taken a liking to her, although she hadn't encouraged him. He shook his head. "All they told me is that it seems to be a vendetta. Smart saboteurs don't announce their intentions."

"Do we still have to dock there?"

"You bet your sweet... hr'm."

Tinian felt a hand grip her shoulder. That must be Sprig Cheever, the musician who had lent her his wife's ID. Tinian had fled the Druckenwell system with Cheeve's troupe, eluding Imperial troops who wanted the contraband she carried. Cheeve's wife planned to follow as soon as Druckenwell calmed down.

The second mate stepped backward and spoke courteously. "Yes, ma'am. The *Quandary's* got a weakening hull section. Didn't want to alarm you passengers, but we've got to get repairs here at Silver."

"That's all right." Cheeve, a KeyBed player and songwriter, wore a short, neat goatee. He dropped his hand from Tinian's shoulder and leaned up against a bulkhead.

Tinian didn't mind when Cheeve hovered. She'd always been small for her age, and she'd grown up with bodyguards. Cheeve had kept his distance during their three weeks on the run, letting her cry when she needed to cry, telling her stories when she needed to be distracted. At Druckenwell, an Imperial Moff had ripped Tinian's life into pieces and fed them to her. Every hour or two she choked on a memory.

"We've come to talk with Una Poot," Cheeve drawled. Una Poot equipped seven resistance cells in this sector of Imperial space. As soon as Tinian delivered the illicit prototypes she and her musical protectors had smuggled off Druckenwell, she could rest. She'd've fulfilled her last reason to go on.

Intellectually, she knew she must find a new purpose -- but knowing didn't make her care. She'd lost too much.

The second mate raised a sparse eyebrow. "Good luck," he said. "You've got 16 resistance fighters lined up ahead of you to talk to her. And she's real busy right now."

Tinian had met the other passengers. They'd shared tasteless rations in a stale-smelling cargo hold that the crew called its "mess." Her fellow travelers were the last survivors of a decimated underground, trying to join the Rebel Alliance.

"She'll see me." Cheeve stroked his goatee. "She's my father's aunt. I've got a standing invitation."

The second mate's mouth made a small, round "o."

And she'll want what's concealed in our instruments, Tinian predicted.



Besides her alleged husband Cheeve, she was traveling with his fellow musician Yccakic -- a multitalented Bith -- and their droid Redd Metalflake. Biths stood out in a crowd because of their high, hairless craniums, quintuple mouth folds, and long knobby hands. She'd learned on this trip that they perceived sounds as precisely as other species perceived colors, and even called them by color names.

She stared out the freighter's tiny viewport. Across several degrees of arc, a deep, rosy pink aurora outshone the stars. Five dark vortices near its center radiated golden energy pulses that crisscrossed, forming visible waves of dark and light pink, amplifying and muting each other. Tinian wondered what they were.

A black square, in front of the aurora grew and resolved into a cube surrounded by long cylinders joined at haphazard angles. The aurora showed between cylinders, except at the center, where Tinian guessed the original station remained inside its add-ons.

"Silver Station doesn't look like much," muttered Yccakic, "because it isn't. It's not even a good place to hide. I can't imagine why Una Poot headquarters here."

"Inertia," said the second mate. "We'll be docking in oh, about 17 minutes. I think you'll want to strap down."

Tinian followed Cheeve back along the ship's creaky corridor into the six-meter bunk space they'd been allotted. Cheeve and Yccakic had bunked together, gallantly giving Tinian the other barely padded shelf.

She climbed onto it and strapped in. At her feet, deactivated for the trip, lay a large, red, dented metal box mounted on treads. Redd Metalflake was the band's self-contained droid sound system. They'd shut him down in order to pass him off as luggage during this leg of the trip, to avoid theft. Their small lock box wasn't big enough to hold him.

Inside Redd Metalflake and the band's instruments nestled an armload of electronic components that was everything valuable she had left. She'd been an armament heiress. Her late grandfather, Strephan I'att, and her late fiancee, Daye Azur-Jamin (*Why can't I remember their faces?*), had developed a personal shield generator that could be mounted on stormtrooper armor, making it truly invincible. Moff Eisen Kerioth had ordered her grandparents shot dead, so that he could claim the technology as his own invention (*At least I can feel hatred*.). Daye had sabotaged the factory and died beneath its debris, rather than let the Empire get away with murder and theft. A rubble-lined crater marked where I'att Armament had stood. Searchers had found no survivors.

She blinked up at the bulging underside of the upper bunk. She must be getting better. She felt like dying most of the time now, instead of all the time. She only wanted to hurt the Empire before she vanished, by giving that armor technology to someone who could produce and use it. Una Poot had been the best bet.

Yccakic's huge, hairless head appeared over the top bunk's edge. Yccakic played a mean Bottom Viol. He was one of the sector's best bass men. "Tinian?"

"Still here," she said.

"Green up, kid. Stay close to Cheeve and me while we're on Silver Station. Okay?"

"Sure." She wished he'd stop worrying about her. She wanted the nightmares to end. She'd dreamed about Daye again last night, trying to warn him to get out of the factory before it exploded. "Yccakic?"

The Bith leaned over again.

"Is Cheeve concerned about the sabotage threat? The... vendetta that crewman told us about?" The band had learned to rely on Cheeve's presentiments. If he predicted trouble, they moved on.

Yccakic's shiny head vanished for a few moments, then reappeared. "He doesn't like it," relayed the Bith, "but he says, 'Out here in the galaxy, things aren't always easy.'"

"Isn't that the truth," she muttered.

* * *

A creaking old protocol droid escorted Tinian, Cheeve, Redd, and Yccakic up a cylindrical passage, around a 90-degree gravity anomaly, then left and right, up and down through three more reorientations until Tinian felt hopelessly lost. Silver Station seemed to be a veritable warren with tarnished walls. She'd never seen so many alien species. Creatures gawked as Tinian, Cheever and Yccakic lugged two enormous instrument cases, followed by a boxy red droid. Redd Metalflake propelled himself around left and right turns, but each time gravity changed, his treads malfunctioned. Cheeve had to lift him, turn him, and set him on the new path.

Tinian offered to help.

"Sorry," Cheeve grunted. "He's only got one handle. You've got to stand guard, and Yccakic's got to steady the instruments."

She thrust a hand into her pocket. Cheeve's wife Twilit had lent her most of a wardrobe, including this long shapeless gray vest. Tinian was trying to stay inconspicuous.

At last the protocol droid led them to a hatch. As it extended a manipulator arm, its servomotors protested with a long squeal. "Wait here," it intoned. "You may consider it your bunk room."

Tinian stepped past the droid into the cubicle. Its bulkheads did not curve, so she guessed that she'd finally breached Silver Station's original construction. It smelled old. Because of her years at I'att Armament, Tinian could identify 31 explosives by odor. Here, thankfully, she didn't smell any -- only staleness that came from one corner, as if some creature had nested there.

The station bunk room would have dwarfed their shipboard cubicle, though, and it had a washroom and a meal chute. Yccakic ordered a liquid concentrate. Some Biths had trouble pushing solid food past all those mouth flaps. "Is it good?" Tinian asked.

"Not particularly," admitted the Bith. "But it's cheap."

Tinian sighed. Watching credits took a lot of getting used to. She'd learned to eat nutritious bulk. She longed for a juicy gorss steak, or half a pot of savory likryt stew.

Several hours later, she got up and started pacing.

"Relax," suggested Cheeve. He slouched at the bunk room's narrow table, punching a datapad and tugging his goatee. Tinian guessed he was writing a song. "This could take a while."

"I'd like to get out and explore."

"I don't think that'd be wise," said Cheeve.

"Why not? Are we prisoners?"

"Not exactly. But your credentials, and Yccakic's, are being checked."

Tinian frowned. "My grandparents worked for the Empire. So did I. Will that count against me?"

"Depends. We're all deserters here."

"Don't go all purple on us, Tinian." Yccakic lounged on a bunk. He hadn't moved since he slurped down his meal. "See if you can interface Redd into that information port. We might as well check the Rebel rumor mill."

Redd sat in the corner farthest from that stale smell. "I'm not very good at that kind of thing," he warned as Tinian approached him. "I'm--"

"Get over here," she ordered, trying to sound serious, but she tended to laugh when addressing Redd. He didn't look anything like the shining protocol and line droids she'd once worked with. After she steered him close to the wall port, he extended his data attachment. "Find out about this bomb threat first," she said.

He downloaded silently. After almost a minute, he said, "It sounds serious, Tinian."

She didn't panic. Redd was always pessimistic. "Cheeve isn't worried. What's up?"

"I'm not very good at--"

"Redd!" drawled Cheeve. "Just tell us." "Silver Station has Ranats," Redd said.

Tinian blinked at Cheeve. "What are they?"

Cheeve punched a datapad key. "Con Quecon, they call themselves. Big rodents native to the Aralia system. They're nasty -- smart enough to fight but too stupid to understand surrender. It's illegal to arm a Ranat. What are they doing here, Redd?"

"Evidently this Rebel matriarch you're looking for--"

"Una Poot," said Cheeve. "Come on, get with it. Edit function: fewer comments, more data."

"Una Poot found a colony of Ranats pilfering large quantities of station food. She ordered them eradicated. The survivors are out for vengeance."

"But if they blow up the station, they'll kill themselves too," Tinian exclaimed.

"I said they're stupid." Cheeve shrugged and shut down his datapad. "The Empire categorizes Ranats as semi-intelligent. It's legal to kill them in self-defense."

"How lovely." Tinian pushed hair out of her face. "I'll remember that if I'm attacked by one."

"The Imperial military has supposedly been trying to train Ranat mercenaries to send against the Rebel Alliance," interjected Yccakic.

"Uh-oh," said Tinian. "These might be mercenaries?"

"Vermin, more likely." Cheeve cocked an eyebrow. "Redd, give us general grapevine. What's the big story today?"

Redd paused, then said, "The Empire has constructed a huge space station capable of destroying an entire planet. They named it the Death Star. They tested it at Alderaan--"

"Alderaan?" chorused Tinian, Cheeve, and Yccakic. "But that's an enormous population center," Yccakic continued.

"The Empire blew it to boulders," Redd said mournfully. Tinian gasped.

"But," Redd continued, "the Alliance destroyed the Death Star."

"That's better," Tinian exclaimed. She wanted to hear that someone was hitting the Empire. "What kind of explosives did they use?"

"One starfighter pilot got in a lucky shot."

"One?" Tinian breathed. That was no lucky shot. That was almost supernatural. It would've interested Daye...

Startled, she blinked at Redd Metalflake. For a moment, she'd felt excited.

* * *

If Una Poot lost Silver Station to a few lousy Ranats, she'd never forgive herself. It'd serve her right for trying to live and let them live.

She sat down on a tabletop to wait for news. The door of her headquarters room -- a modified galley that suited large groups -- slid shut behind her rag-tag security people as they scattered into the Station. Ever since she'd arrived as a young merchanter, she'd despised uniformed security and everyone else who looked official. Even the few uniformed troops the Rebel Alliance had scraped together gave her the mulligrubs.

Una and her first husband, Drogue, had delivered a tugship cargo of culson gas to Ord Segra spaceport. They hadn't known that Ord Segra customs exacted seven percent of cargo value in bribe money. They'd refused to pay. Customs officials had shot the Poots' tug tanks full of holes and given chase. She and Drogue had jumped blindly into hyperspace and emerged here. Drogue had died soon afterward, prospecting the Dragonflower Nebula for other valuable gases. He'd taken too many risks...

Una studied her gnarled, spotted hands. There'd been two husbands since, and neither had survived. Now she was aging with Silver Station. Before she made the Final Jump, she wanted to light a few fuses that'd burn long and slow, and explode some day in the Emperor's face.

She glared at the galley door. If those blasted Ranats destroyed Silver, the Monor system would lose a vital shipment of blaster carbines. She ought to be out there hunting Ranats herself, but she couldn't move quickly enough to blast them anymore.

Her comlink buzzed. "What?" she barked. "Did you find them?"

"No. A Sprig Cheever to speak with you, with prior clearance. He has two companions. Their credentials check."

She made a fist and whacked her table. On another occasion, she'd've welcomed young Cheeve. His hot music and his cool attitude peeled years off the calendar. "What does he want?"

"He claims to have something you can use."

Maybe she should've trained a regular defense force, instead of relying on secrecy to protect Silver Station. But nothing lasted forever.

"All right," she grumbled. "Send them up."

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When the hatch slid open, Tinian recognized the protocol droid who had met them at the docks. The same asymmetrical dribble of grease leaked from his mid-chest restraining bolt. "Una Poot has agreed to meet with you. Follow me."

Cheeve had dug Tinian's pieces of modified stormtrooper armor out of his KeyBed, Redd Metalflake's insides, and Yccakic's Bottom Viol. Carrying their stash, they followed the droid deeper into Silver Station.

Una Poot's "receiving room" looked like a galley -- tables stood head to head, wall to wall. The crone herself sat at the head of one table. Threads of gray hair dangled over her shoulders. She wore an old green tunic and a pair of black pants that rolled at the top. Maybe they'd been half of some larger person's shipboards.

"Cheeve," she exclaimed in a rusty-sounding voice. "I wish I had time to chatter, but I don't. What is it you think I can use?"

"This is Tinian l'att," Cheeve said casually. "She's got -- you tell her, Tinian."

Tinian related her story. At the appropriate moment, Yccakic displayed the vital pair of smuggled c-boards. "I only hope someone can use them against the Empire," Tinian finished.

"Custom armor isn't cheap," snapped Una Poot. "Most resistance troops can't afford any armor. What's your price?"

"You don't understand. I'm giving them to you. You'll have to analyze them, and--"

"Everybody has her price. If I don't pay you, you'll come for me later."

Tinian considered. "Well, there's a favor you could do me."

"Hah. There's always a price. I told you. What's the favor?"

"When I was a kid--"

"You're still a kid."

Tinian flushed. Pain and loss had aged her. Didn't it show? "I had a Wookiee bodyguard who died helping me escape the Imperials. I'd like to find someone who was related to him, so I could make sure Wrill's memory was honored. That would mean a lot to him."

Una Poot half smiled. "That's an unusual favor, missie. I'll think about it, if I've got time. It'd be nice to be rich enough to have bodyguards."

"It was," Tinian admitted humbly. "I've only begun to realize how nice it was."

"Good," Una Poot cackled. "The more the Empire took from you, the harder you'll fight."

Tinian glared at the crone. "In that case, they're in for trouble. They slaughtered my family while I watched."

Una Poot's eyes darkened. "There's more behind that pain in your eyes than your family or a bodyguard, girl. What was he like?"

He? How had the old woman guessed? Tinian pictured Daye in her mind: dark-haired, a long gentle face, and that odd gray streak at the center of one eyebrow. "He was brilliant," Tinian remembered. "Hard working. And -- I never told anyone about this on Druckenwell, but he's dead now, so it can't hurt him, can it?"

"What can't hurt him? Come on, girl. I haven't got time to play whatsit."

"He was Force-sensitive. He read people perfectly. Including me. He had a generous spirit. He always tried to please."

Una Poot scowled. "Sounds like the Empire made an enemy in you, missie. I'll alert the ships docked here and see if anybody knows who might be related to this bodyguard of yours. What was his name? Wrr?"

"Wrri. Short for Wrrlevgebev."

"Wrrlevgebev," repeated Una Poot. "But don't call me. I'll call you. Oh, and thanks for the c-boards. It's a long shot, but--"

"I understand," said Tinian.

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Una Poot stared after Cheeve and his adopted refugee richgirl. The technology they'd brought? Extraneous equipage for wealthy, uniformed units. Now, if they could've resurrected Tinian's Force-sensitive sweetheart, that might've solved a crisis for her. Una needed to find someone sensitive, like her first man -- Drogue -- had been. Her blaster carbines must reach the right people on Monor. It was a tricky system to negotiate.

But Drogue was 30 years dead, and evidently this one was gone, too.

And she'd never turned down a windfall. She tossed Cheeve's contributions into a box, then reached for her comlink. One Wookiee berthed at Silver knew all the clans. She could pay for those pieces by making one call.

She thumbed the comlink.

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To Tinian's surprise, Una Poot summoned her and her companions back to the galley that evening. Behind the crone stood a huge Wookiee of a color Tinian had never seen. His fur was dark brown, but each guard hair glistened silver at the tip. The effect made him shimmer. "This is Chenlambec," said Una Poot. "He might be able to help you pass that message."

Tinian barked A short greeting. Chenlambec woofed back. Una Poot raised both of her scraggly eyebrows. "Where did you learn to speak Wookiee?"

"From Wrri," explained Tinian. "Does Chenlambec work for you?"

The Wookiee bent forward, laughing.

"Not at the moment." Una Poot smiled with both sides of her mouth this time. "He's a bounty hunter."

Tinian stared. She'd heard of beings who hunted others for money -- who killed for profit, not patriotism. She despised the idea. She'd never dreamed that she might stand in front of a hunter.



"You two can talk in my private alcove, if you'd like." Grinning, Una Poot gestured toward a hatch on one side of the galley.

Tinian narrowed her eyes, repelled by the woman's sense of humor.

Chenlambec spouted a rapid stream in Shyriwook, asking how she had known Wrrlevgebev.

She didn't think that the bounty hunter would appreciate hearing publicly that Wrri had been her family's slave. Evidently she'd have to address him privately, if she talked at all.

And this would have meant so much to Wrri. She could do it for Wrri. She led the big Wookiee into Una Poot's private alcove.

It was small and bare with a single ancient luma dangling from its ceiling. "I was 12 when I met Wrri." Tinian shut the hatch and backed up against it. She positioned her hand near the control that would open it again.

Chenlambec bent to stand under the alcove's low ceiling. He kept to a corner opposite her.

"There were slavers in Il Avali, the city where I grew up. One of them was beating him -- it looked like they meant to kill him with a shock whip. Later, I found out he'd tried to keep them from selling a young female Kitonak away from her child. Anyway, I got loose from my grandmother and jumped into the ring." She'd never realized the danger. "I threw myself over the poor bloody creature and yelled at the slavers that I'd buy him. Grandmother argued with me, but I won. That's how I met Wrrl." Wrrl had been utterly ethical, totally loyal. How could any Wookiee stoop to bounty hunting?

Chenlambec crossed his silvery arms. A broad black bandolier spanned his chest from right shoulder to left hip, studded with odd silver cubes. He barked a question.

"I didn't know then about your people and the life debt," she answered. "But I found out as soon as I learned to speak Shyriiwook. Please tell his clan that he discharged his debt fully, Chenlambec. He died helping me escape the Imperial stormtroopers who killed my grandparents."

He bowed his head and woofed softly.

"You're welcome," she said, confused but impressed by his private manner.

Then he raised his head and told a strange story. Evidently several of the bounties that the Empire had paid him were wasted. He had actually helped several "acquisitions" escape to the Rebel Alliance, then donated most of the funds that the Empire paid him... to Una Poot for buying arms, this time; last time, to a refugee group. He added that Una Poot was one of three people -- four, now -- who knew his secret. He asked her to honor it.

Tinian shut her slack jaw and wished Daye were here ... not just because she missed him so desperately, but he would've known if the huge stranger were lying. Left to herself, she had to trust her hunch that Chenlambec was what he claimed -- someone whose mission actually excited her -- and that he wanted her respect in return. Cheeve and Yccakic had tried to comfort her by caring about her, but she needed to care about someone else.

She stretched out a hand.

He clasped it with a grip as gentle and strong as Wrrl's had been. Gravely he thanked her again. Then he motioned her away from the hatch.

"Wait," she exclaimed.

Chenlambec backed off a long step.

She wondered where -- in all the thousand-thousand worlds -- she'd gotten this crazy idea. But she was no musician. And she knew explosives. And Chenlambec made her want to live. "Would you let me apprentice to you?"

Chenlambec gave a startled woof.

"I'm serious," she said. "I grew up in an armament factory. My knowledge of explosives might be useful in your trade."

His blue eyes twinkled as he apologized and declined -- she was too small and delicate for bounty hunting. He had survived the deaths of two partners, one very recently. From now on, he would hunt alone.

"I have no fear of dying," Tinian insisted. "In your profession, if I died, it would be clean and fast."

Not necessarily. He crossed his arms and looked half away, a pose Wrrl had used only when adamantly refusing.

"I see," she said sadly. "Well. Thank you for carrying that news for me."

She pushed out of the alcove wondering what she would do with the rest of her life. She'd discovered how to care again, and that she wanted to care, and it was a relief ... if temporary. Maybe Una Poot had a place for her.

The crone wasn't waiting with Cheever and Yccakic. "Everything all right?" asked Yccakic.

Tinian shrugged. "Yes. Good-bye, Chenlambec."

The Wookiee raised a hand in farewell and then left her alone with her traveling companions. Dispirited, she trailed Cheeve and Yccakic to the bunk room. While she'd spoken with the bounty hunter, they'd agreed to play a special cruise-concert for Una Poot and her inner circle, tomorrow afternoon on board her personal tugship... in lieu of rent on their cabin.

"Rent?" Tinian exclaimed. "On this hole?"

Cheeve shrugged. "It's a chance to perform. Feel like singing?"

Tinian cleared her throat. Cheeve's wife, Twilit Hearth, could scorch blast shielding with her voice. "I wouldn't do you justice. Do you know enough instrumental numbers?"

"We can carry the show if you'll fill in one or two songs--"

"Anybody tired?" asked Yccakic. "We'd better dim the lights and get some rest, if we're performing tomorrow."

Tinian lay down, but she couldn't sleep. Every time she shut her eyes, she saw Daye... or Wrri, rushing the stormtroopers who finally killed him... or saboteurs, threatening to blow holes in Silver Station--

Abruptly she sat bolt upright. She'd been asleep on her feet! She should be out sniffing the corridors for explosives.

Cheeve's hold-out blaster dangled out of a pocket on his pants, which he'd hung haphazardly over one end of his bunk. She slipped it into her vest pocket and crept out into the corridor.

Two hours later, she caught a faint whiff of something that made the hair on her neck stand up: JL-12-F, a product of one of I'att Armament's competitors. Manufactured for controlled planetside demolition, it exploded in a symmetrical, almost linear pattern. It did not belong on board a space station.

Sabotage. Following the whiff trail, she stole up a corridor that led toward the docking area.

That couldn't be right. She reversed herself and hurried in the opposite direction. The scent grew stronger. She followed it down an access ladder.

On the fourth level down, she lost it. She doubled back again and climbed off the ladder into an area that was marginally tidier than others, maybe housing for Silver Station's upper class ... such as it was. Down here, the odor grew so strong that she wondered why other people hadn't noticed. She gripped the little blaster in one hand and slunk forward.

Two dark, furry shapes crouched next to the flat outer bulkhead of Silver Station's original construct. "Hey!" Tinian cried. She leveled the blaster.

The aliens whirled toward her. Each had a long, pointed snout and small round ears. "Hey!" they echoed her in chorus.

Then they charged.

Tinian fired. One Ranat curled up, shrieking. The other kept coming. Long sharp teeth closed on her left leg. Tinian screamed and struggled to draw a bead on the vicious creature without shooting herself in the foot. The Ranat shook her leg so hard that stars danced in front of her. She flailed for balance.

A clear shot! Tinian took it. Powerful jaws released her calf, and the creature screamed at her. She backed off and fired again.

The Ranat charged at her other leg.

She squeezed off another blast. The Ranat collapsed at her feet.

She kicked it away, splattering it with blood from her leg.

The other Ranat hadn't moved. But what about that explosive? She limped forward. Her injured leg trembled when she tried to bend down.

Be calm, she admonished herself. She crouched, even though it hurt. The JL-12-F was packed into a standard cylinder, heat-fused against the outer bulkhead. Fused to its other end were a primer and c-board. Somehow the Ranats had obtained a solid-state detonator, almost fail-safe.

The c-board had two vulnerable spots, though, where the main circuit entered and exited the timing mechanism. Tinian scrambled back to the first Ranat and frisked it. She found a belt knife, limped to the bomb again, and delicately cut the connections. That disabled the detonator.

She exhaled. Then she frowned. The c-board might be dead, but she couldn't leave an explosive canister this close to an outer bulkhead. If a spark set it off here, everyone on board would be at risk, from Cheeve to Chenlambec. She tried to pry the knife into a hairline crack between explosive cylinder and detonator. Its blade didn't bend, which worried her. The steel must be brittle--

It snapped without warning. She dropped it in time to save herself another deep, nasty cut.

This was nothing she could disarm without proper tools ... but JL12-F did require a spark, not an impact, to detonate it. She backed up to the cylinder, balanced on her hurt leg, and kicked sharply with her heel. Fresh jabs of pain shot through her leg. The cylinder broke loose from the bulkhead and clattered onto the deck.

Gingerly she scooped it up and carried it deeper into the station. She glanced back to see if any Ranats followed. A red splatter trail marked her route. When she started walking again, she almost slipped in a red puddle. *That'd collected quickly!*

She set down the explosive canister at mid-corridor and hammered on the nearest door. "Hello?" she shouted. "This is an emergency!"

* * *

The Stationer took her to a medic on Level Three and called Cheeve. When Tinian emerged an hour later, leaning on Cheeve, a huge, shimmering Wookiee waited in the corridor outside. He howled somberly at her.

"I'm all right," she assured Chenlambec (*I have one more friend in the universe!*). "They don't have a medical droid, but there's a competent human in there. He fused the artery. I'm just supposed to take it easy for a few days."

He cocked his head and barked a peculiar question - did she realize that he and dozens of others owed her a life debt?

Tinian laughed. "No, no. I saved my own life, too. So it doesn't count."

He woofed an offer. Tinian stared.

"What did he say?" asked Cheeve.

Tinian felt slightly rummy from chemical painkillers. "I, um, yesterday I offered to go into business with Chenlambec. He just invited me on board his ship to see what I knew about his trade."

"But isn't he a... "

Chenlambec clasped his fur-draped hands, looking calm.

"It's your life." Cheeve touched her shoulder. "But I wish you'd stay with us. Who'll sing that gig tonight?"

"You've been kind, Cheeve. Much kinder than you needed to be, and I appreciate everything you've done. But I'm no musician. I need to find my own place. You want that, don't you?"

"Of course."

Yccakic turned so that Chenlambec couldn't see his face. "Tinian, be careful. He might--"

"I'll be fine." If Tinian understood one thing about Wookiees, she understood the life debt. Rightly or wrongly, Chenlambec considered himself bound.

Limping on her numb leg, she followed him back out to the docking area, then through an umbilical onto a small saucer-shaped craft with three mammoth engines. Like Silver Station, it had seen better days. Better decades, she decided as she rubbed a rust spot.

Still, this looked like her chance to hurt the Empire.



Chenlambec sat her down in front of his shipboard computer. He called up a succession of weaponry images. Tinian recited specs for an hour. Then he tossed her a blaster rifle. She disassembled and reassembled it in four minutes.

Then she yawned. Instantly, Chenlambec apologized. She mustn't walk clear back to the bunk room, he insisted. She could nap on board his little ship *Wroshyr*, named for the home trees of Kashyyyk. In the afternoon, after she'd caught a long healing nap, they could discuss terms -- if she still wanted to apprentice to him.

She collapsed on a bunk that felt softer than clouds and fell asleep before she could thank him.

* * *

Daye Azur-Jamin shut his eyes and let his companions carry him through the little blockade runner's airlock. Delayed at Doldur Spaceport, they'd used up their last medpac two days ago, and the pain was back in full force. He couldn't feel one leg at all, but that was a blessing. The other leg made up for it. One hand, too, was crushed, and his companions had bandaged his shoulder and head with synthflesh, but beneath that superficially healed layer, they all throbbed.

Woyiq, a big beefy human, carried the end of Daye's pallet nearest his feet. He let go with one hand and waved at a station droid. "Hey, you! You -- how about a float bed? I've got an injured human here!" It was indicative of Woyiq's strength that the pallet didn't wobble when he dropped one side.

The droid scurried closer. It was an aging protocol unit, probably in charge of docking.

"I am Toalar Yalom Yalom," said the Gotal who carried the pallet's head end. Two cone-shaped perceptor horns protruded from the top of his head. "Una Poot knows me. She will want this human to be taken to a medic immediately."

"It is very early morning here at Silver Station," said the droid, "and we have just gone off saboteur alert. She may still be sleeping."

"This human might still recover if she got him into bacta today." Toalar's knobby gray-brown brows lowered over red eyes. "Take us to your medical station."

"I am sorry. All arrivals must be interviewed before--"

"Fine. Take us for our interview now." Gotsals spoke in monotones, but Toalar looked fierce. The horns helped.

Evidently the droid was also programmed to recognize fierceness. Either that, or he automatically allowed for emergencies. He led them deep into the gray-walled station.

"Saboteur alert?" Daye murmured as they carried him.

"Whatever it was, it's over," Toalar answered.

In a galley full of tables, Woyiq and Toalar set down Daye's pallet. Toalar walked up to an old woman who had incredibly cold eyes. Toalar had told Daye that Una Poot's incompetent crone act was her version of deep cover, though she was slightly crazy. Toalar claimed she had connections and resources that would surprise him. Evidently Toalar's resistance cell back on Druckenwell depended on Una Poot for tactical support.

"Toalar," she creaked. "Bless your horns. You haven't reported in too long. Has the resistance died on Druckenwell?"

Toalar's face twitched. It was flat where a human would've had a nose.

"Far from it. All Druckenwell's stirred up at the moment. I need--"

She walked to Daye's pallet. "Who's this?"

Daye tried to sit up, but his hand and shoulder wouldn't bear weight. "Help, Woyiq," he called. The big Human stepped into position behind Daye's head and slid his hands down Daye's shoulders to lever him upright. "My name is Daye Azur-Jamin. I am an armament specialist. I want to join the Rebellion."

"Good. But why should we take you?"

"I worked directly with Strephan I'att, of--"

"I'att Armament on Druckenwell?" cackled the crone. "Then you served the Empire."

"Yes," Daye admitted. He sensed her sincerity, despite her unpleasant manners. She would trust him only if he were absolutely honest. "Strephan I'att and I developed an armor field that would have made stormtroopers invulnerable."

Instantly, he sensed that his news startled her. Did she know him? Should he know her? She turned her back and walked several steps away to rummage in a box on one table. She drew out a small square object. When she carried it back to Daye, she had regained her skeptical-crone expression. "Recognize this?"

Daye squinted his good eye. It was a c-board, and -- by the Force, he recognized it! "That is a preliminary processing unit," he said. "The heat deflection function of the armor dissipated energy momentarily, until the anti-energy field--"

"Fine," said Una Poot. "You're real."

"Tinian," he breathed. "Has she been here? Who brought her? Is she still here?"

Una Poot's laugh sounded like a snort. "She's not on board, since that's what you really want to know."

His inner sense told him that her statement was literally true... but misleading. "Where is she?"

Una Poot hitched one foot up on a galley bench. "Listen, son. I have buried three husbands in space. Young love doesn't last. So long as the Empire spreads, there is more important work to do than to sit staring into each others' eyes. Can you live with that ethic? Because if you can't, I don't want you."

"I can," said Daye. "I let Tinian think that I'd died when the factory was destroyed. When I blew it up -- from inside."

The old woman's frown wrinkles smoothed out. "Oh," she said softly.

"I mean to dedicate what's left of my life to bringing down the Empire."

She grinned. "Good answer, boy. In that case, welcome to the Rebel Alliance. I'll call down to the medic and tell him you're on your way. But as soon as you're out of the soup, I'll have work for you."

"Of course. That's what I came here for. I had no idea you would have pieces to work with. That will simplify everything."

He sensed faint surprise; she hadn't meant to assign him R&D work. But she picked up his cue as if that'd been her plan. "We can't afford to build it here. That's the only problem. Toalar?" Una Poot turned to Daye's Gotal companion. "Do you remember where the medical center is? Deck Three?"

"I think so."

"Then get Daye Azur-Jamin down there on the double."

* * *

Tinian woke up with an alarm klaxon ringing in her ears. Her leg throbbed the same rhythm. "What is it?" she cried. Then she remembered she'd bunked down on a stranger's ship. Had she been betrayed?

Not by a Wookiee. If he thought she'd saved his life, the last thing he would ever do was betray her.

She stumbled in the only direction possible and found Chenlambec sitting in front of the *Wroshy*'s command console. "What is it?" she asked again.

He bared his teeth and pointed at the viewscreen.

A huge wedge-shaped ship had appeared near Silver Station. "Star Destroyer," she whispered. Adrenaline washed through her. A swarm of smaller ships, TIE fighters and others, swooped across the narrow distance between the Star Destroyer and the helpless station. Some had already reached it.

A light blinked on Chenlambec's console. He swatted a control. A cracked voice came over a cabin loudspeaker. "... now docked, this is Una Poot. We are under attack and outnumbered. Evacuate if you can. All ships now..."

Chenlambec roared a challenge. Then he pointed at the other viewscreen. A squadron of Imperial fighters ran alongside Silver Station, pouring energy beams into the joint where two of its external corridors met. One long cylinder broke away from its neighbor. Gases spewing out of its cut end jet-powered the cylinder out to an even more desperate angle.

Tinian gulped. "My partners are in there somewhere! We've got to help them!"

Chenlambec roared a negative: he couldn't afford moments, and she couldn't help her companions by dying with them. He slammed a shaggy fist onto a control, then flicked a row of linked switches. "Are you powering up?" Tinian clutched an overhead conduit. "Are we going to fight or run for it?"

He didn't answer. The moment his ready lights glowed, he grasped a throttle momentarily -- then flicked off the linked row. The *Wroshyr* lurched. Tinian assumed they'd just disengaged from the station. The Imperials, he explained, would fire on anything that was escaping under power, and his shields weren't strong enough to absorb energy at this close range.

"Why not?" she exclaimed. "You've got to have shields!"

He barked: full shielding would cost more than the ship was worth. More than he brought home from a good bounty job.

Tinian gaped. People died because they couldn't afford protection? She'd always taken armor for granted. Now she realized that poverty and peril sometimes traveled together.

Slowly, Silver Station seemed to drift away from the *Wroshyr*. Tinian caught herself holding her breath. This was just like before, waiting to be spotted and shot. Cheeve, Redd, and Yccakic--

Wait. She'd slept through the afternoon. By now, they should be on board Una Poot's private tugship. What luck! Cheeve did have a knack for leaving town before trouble arrived.

Chenlambec suggested that if she didn't want to watch, she hustle aft and strap down.

Tinian sank into his copilot's chair. "I'd rather help, if I can."

Chenlambec swept a hand across the row of engine controls: mains, laterals, retros. He would man the ship's laser cannon if she'd stand ready to fire up all engines simultaneously. He would program a burn into the nav computer.

Tinian had always learned best under pressure. "I'll do what I can," she promised.

* * *

Daye had tried to relax when Silver Station's human medic lowered him into the tank and filled it with clear liquid. He tried to breathe normally through the mask. The synthetic fluid didn't sting his eyes.

Then the medic released a flood of brilliant red bacta into the tank. Billions of tiny creatures seemed to crawl over him. A weird smell slithered into his breath mask. His skin twitched where he'd been wounded and started to heal, either naturally or covered with synthflesh. The medic had warned him that his body might resist treatment. He must relax and try to let the bacta work. It would seek out traumatized flesh. Healed tissue barred its way.

To keep from fighting it, he thought hard. He'd thrown everything away when he'd blown up I'att Armament. What was he becoming? A hopeless idealist, a freedom fighter?

He might survive now. The bacta might heal him.

(*Microscopic creatures stung flesh, nibbling his scars--*)

If the bacta healed him, he would run to Tinian --

No. He would still put Tinian behind him, both for her sake and so he could serve the Alliance freely. Besides, thinking about Tinian gouged fresh wounds into another part of him that was trying to heal.

He wondered if the bacta were dancing on his eardrums or if he heard an alarm. The medic had stepped out several lifetimes ago, actually only minutes, but--

Through red fluid and glass he spotted a huge dark form followed by one with Gotal horns. Woyiq and Toalar? The shapes came on quickly. The big one shrank again, moving away.

Then it returned, raising something overhead. Something with lots of right angles. A chair?

Daye's tank split wide open. Fluid splashed the clinic floor.

Toalar seized Daye and started unhooking his breath mask and harness. He talked quickly while he worked, putting an amazing amount of expression into monotone speech. "Silver Station's under attack. I don't know if the Ranats squealed or if our ship was followed, but the Empire is here. There are scan pulses bouncing through everything. Una Poot's got no defense force. The station's coming to pieces." Toalar had always claimed that his cone-shaped receptors picked up energy emissions.

"Here, Daye." Woyiq flung him a brown cloth bundle. "It's all I could find. I'm sorry. I hope it'll do--"



Before Woyiq apologized a second time, Toalar had slipped Daye into the cast-off Givin robe. Its sleeves dangled over his hands and its selvage dragged past his feet, but it covered him.

"Can you stand?" Toalar asked. "Did the bacta take?"

"I'll try." Daye gritted his teeth and tried moving his legs. One tracked. The other didn't. "You'd better carry me."

"Right," said Woyiq. "Up you get." He turned around.

Daye wrapped his arms around the big man's neck. Woyiq straightened. Daye tried to grip Woyiq's middle with his legs, but only his right leg functioned. At least his shoulder didn't hurt as badly as before. "Go," he grunted.

He hung on until both arms and both shoulders ached, and then he hung on longer. Toalar dashed ahead of Woyiq. Brandishing a blaster, he peered around a corner and waved an all-clear.

Just as Woyiq followed around that corner, the corridor erupted in blaster fire. Laser blasts splattered the walls. Woyiq spun, and Daye flew off. He hit a wall feet-first. Newly regenerated nerves screamed bloody murder.

White armor appeared at the far end of the passage. "Go!" Daye cried. "I'll just slow you down!"

"Good try," muttered Woyiq as he bent over Daye. "We almost lost you once." He seized Daye by both arms and heaved him over one shoulder.

Daye raised his head to look behind. A stormtrooper dropped into a firing crouch. Woyiq's shoulder drove into Daye's stomach. He curled around that shoulder, trying to cushion the gut-pounding bounce -- and present a smaller target.

"Stop!" Toalar shouted. Daye raised his head again, tried to orient himself, and felt himself fall. He caught hold of something. Yellow foam sprayed his hands.

"Here they come!" Toalar shouted again.

Woyiq lowered his shoulder and ran at a tightly closed hatch.

Daye squinted to see what he'd activated. It looked like a flame douser, mounted by one clip to the bulkhead. He lunged at the clip and detached it, then scooted backward to lean against the bulkhead. He aimed the thick yellow spray past Woyiq and Toalar up the passage.

A white shape dashed into his line of fire. It arrived upright, went diagonal, and skidded out of sight horizontally. Woyiq presented his other shoulder and rammed the hatch again. It rang like a huge bell. Light appeared along one edge. "You're through!" Daye cried, holding the spray steady. Another stormtrooper slid into the slime, through it, and past... but now they had troopers on both sides.

Woyiq picked up Daye and pushed him at the narrow opening. Daye reached through, slapping the wall high and low. Something gave. The hatch sprang open. Daye fell through a 90-degree gravity shift and hit the deck again. This time he rolled, absorbing the impact. He was going numb all over.

Woyiq picked him up like a doll and carried him in both arms. Toalar covered their retreat, firing behind them.

Woyiq took a right turn.

"No!" Toalar shouted. "Straight! We're almost at the main dock!" Woyiq sped up a final passage, around one more corner, and up a boarding ramp. He skidded to a halt at the sight of a blast rifle's muzzle.

"Friendly!" called Toalar. "Una, let us through!"

* * *

Thank the Force! "Hurry it up!" Una shouted. "Did you get him?"

The tugship shuddered. Woyiq pounded down into its main passage. "They fired the explosive bolts," exclaimed Toalar. "We're underway."

"Is that Daye?" Una hated repeating questions. Especially urgent ones. "We need that boy."

Woyiq turned around and showed Daye and Una Poot to each other. Pink streaks on Daye's face evidenced an incomplete bacta treatment.

"Good," she said. "Bring him to the bridge."

Daye asked, "Are the armor pieces aboard?"

"Yes, though I don't know why." Una Poot seized Woyiq's arm and pulled the huge human along. She felt like a Chakra-Fan hauling a Whiphid. "Our people can't afford body armor." Still, she knew people who might be able to develop it. The uniformed Alliance sprang to mind. This time, she didn't dismiss the thought. With Silver Station about to blow, she'd have to lie low for a while ... as soon as her tugship delivered one shipment to the Monor system. "What took you so long?" she puffed.

"Sorry," said Woyiq. "Really, I'm sorry--"

"We stopped to play tag with stormtroopers." Toalar holstered his blaster and rubbed his perceptor horns. "Long day."

"Get up here," Una ordered. "Get Daye where he can see the main screen." This attack would cost him dearly. They would never get him into bacta in time for complete regeneration now. He would need prosthetics, and from the twitch in his face, he knew it. She must give him hope. These sensitives could be delicate.

The tugship shuddered. "We're hit!" cried a crewman.

"They worry," grumbled Una. "These shields'll stand four or five direct hits. The *Sitting Duck* was a fine ship even with two dozen culson gas tanks in tow. We'll make it. Over there, son. Look." She pointed out a vector.

Silver Station shrank in the near distance. Farther away, a small, saucer-shaped ship swooped back toward a TIE fighter, firing energy bursts. The Imperial exploded. The saucer streaked out of the nebula and vanished.

Still cradled by Woyiq, Daye tugged the Givin robe closed over his chest. "Somebody hit back, anyway," he said.

"That was your lady," Una crowed. "She got away safe, too." Tinian had also used precious comm time begging Una to rescue Cheeve, Redd, and Yccakic. Una had transmitted back: they were as safe as she was.

"Thank you," Daye exclaimed. "But how do you know it's Tinian?"

"She joined up with a friend of mine, a big strong Wookiee. Chenlambec needed a partner with her kind of abilities." Partnering that pair had been a rare stroke of serendipity. Another long fuse now sputtered under the Emperor's throne.

"Wookiee activists aren't known for leading quiet lives," Daye objected softly.

Drogue had been protective, too. He'd hurt when Una hurt. "You want to fight the Empire. So does she. But she needs someone to teach her. Are you going to deny her that?"

Before he could answer, Toalar pointed at the aft screen. "Look!" Two squadrons of TIE fighters chased the tugship at full speed. They obviously wouldn't reach firing range before the *Duck* jumped into hyperspace.

"This is some ship." Daye tugged the Givin robe closed again.

Una grinned. "That's why we held her for final evacuation. She's my own, and I've kept the crew current."

"But Silver Station's in Imperial hands." Daye shook his head. "We're defeated, aren't we, Una Poot?"

Una thought of the Rebel rabble waiting at Monor and the cargo stashed in her holds. She planted both hands on her hips. "Never. The Empire can't beat us, so long as one of us lives. Every time we escape, we live to fight another day. If enough worlds rise, we'll drive the Empire out of the galaxy."

Daye's dark eyes gleamed. "I hope we survive to see that."

Mission accomplished: his gloom had lifted. She patted his uninjured shoulder. "As soon as we jump to lightspeed and my medic looks you over, how about a little music to help you rest? You'll enjoy my nephew Cheeve's band--"

"Cheeve?" Daye's odd eyebrows shot up. "Sprig Cheever, of Druckenwell?"